

Text Study & Program: Advocacy- A Jewish Perspective

60 Minutes

Preparation for L'Taken Social Justice Seminars



Goals

- Participants will explore the attributes and actions of advocates in Jewish and secular topics
- Participants will understand why advocacy is important and effective in creating social change
- Participants will be able to situate themselves in a Jewish tradition of advocacy, connecting their experience at their synagogue (and on L'Taken) in the broader history of RAC and Reform Judaism

0:00-0:10	Set Induction: What does it mean to be an advocate?
0:10-0:40	Studying Three Biblical Advocates: Moses, Esther, & Abraham
0:40-0:50	Exploring Advocacy's Role in the Reform Jewish Tradition
0:50-1:00	Advocacy and the Creation of the Religious Action Center

0:00-0:10 Set Induction: What does it mean to be an advocate?

- Ask students to list the first words that come to mind when they hear the word advocate (noun).
- Looking at the words on the list, as a group, come up with a definition of an advocate. (Answer the question: What does it mean to be an advocate?)

Possible Definitions:

- "A Person who speaks or writes in support of a defense of a person, cause, etc. (usually followed by of): an advocate of peace." (Define.com)
- "A person who pleads for or in behalf of another; intercessors." (Define.com)
- "One that supports or promotes the interest of another." (Merriam-Webster)
- Discuss: When have you been an advocate? What did you advocate for? Can you share examples of advocates in your own life or throughout history? What common traits make these individuals successful or unsuccessful in their advocacy?

0:10-0:40 Studying Three Biblical Advocates: Abraham, Moses, & Esther

For this segment, students should divide into smaller groups. You can either:

- 1) Have each group study one of the three advocates (in separate documents) then return to a large group setting to report out and discuss the comparison questions and table (**Appendix A**)
- 2) Have each group study one of the three advocates (in separate documents); then, scramble students into new small groups, each containing a few people who have studied each of the advocates, and have them report out and discuss comparison questions (**Appendix A**)
- 3) Have each small group study all three advocates (in separate documents) and discuss comparison questions (**Appendix A**)

0:40-0:50 Exploring Advocacy's Role in the Reform Jewish Tradition

Transition to a conversation about the Jewish imperative to pursue justice: We have great examples of advocates in our texts—people who made their voices heard and stood up for a cause. But, just because people in the Bible engaged in this behavior doesn't mean that we have to. (Of course, there are lots of

behaviors in the Bible that we would NOT want to replicate). So, why do we feel compelled to emulate these three people?

Write the Hebrew words צִדְקָה צִדְקָה תִּרְדּוּף on a whiteboard or piece of butcher paper at the front of the room. Ask a student to read the Hebrew. Ask for a translation of the Hebrew.

“Tzedek, Tzedek, Tirdof”

“Justice, Justice, You Shall Pursue” (Deuteronomy 16:20)

Introduction of Pittsburgh Platform text: God commands us to pursue justice. It’s not a request or a suggestion; it’s a command. In the Reform Jewish community, we believe that the pursuit of justice is a key piece of our Jewish identity. This is a part of who we are. On three occasions during the last century and a half, the Reform rabbinate has adopted comprehensive statements to help guide the thought and practice of our Movement. Below is an excerpt from the most recent “Statement of Principles” that affirms the central tenets of Judaism – God, Torah and Israel.

Distribute pieces of paper with an expert from the Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism, Pittsburgh, 1999 (**Appendix B**).

Discussion Questions:

- What does it mean to pursue justice? Does your personal definition fit the definition outlined by the Statement of Principles of Reform Judaism?
- Is pursuing justice the same as repairing the world? How is it the same? How is it different?
- What role does advocating our elected officials play in the pursuit of justice?

0:50-1:00 Advocacy and the Creation of the Religious Action Center:

Excerpts from Rabbi Eric Yoffie’s speech at the rededication of the Religious Action Center in 2003:

“In 1959, the Union [for Reform Judaism] passed a resolution to establish [The Religious Action Center] in Washington, together with the Central Conference of American Rabbis. Its purpose would be to influence Congress on the great moral issues about which our Movement had spoken, and to educate our membership about these issues as well...”

“The opponents of the Center offered a number of arguments. They said that it would be arrogant for any institution to presume to speak for us all – we Reform Jews are famously unable to agree on the time of day. The rabbis don’t agree with the laypeople, the Midwesterners don’t agree with the Easterners, the traditionalist don’t agree with the classical Reform Judaism, the opponents insisted that ethics means personal ethic and individuals conscience, and not collective political action. . .

Discussion Questions:

- Do you believe the arguments of the opponents of the Center hold any weight? Why or Why not?
- What are some arguments that you think were given in support of the creating the Religious Action Center?

Additional excerpts:

“When the debate was over and the smoke had cleared, supporters of the Center had beaten back the opponents by a vote of almost four to one. The Reform Movement by that vote set its course and made a statement about fundamental values from which it has not deviated in 42 years. And our statement

was simply this: Yes, personal ethics are important. *G'milut chasadim*-acts of kindness-are important. Setting up soup kitchens, food pantries, and clothing drives is important. It is good and right that we reach into the river of despair and rescue people who are drowning. But, there comes a time when you need to move upstream and see who's throwing them in. Amos said: "Let justice roll down like the waters." Justice, he said, and not charity, and for good reason. Because while charity alleviates the effects of poverty, justice seeks to eliminate its cause."

Discussion Question:

- How does the existence of the Religious Action Center help the Reform Movement to pursue justice?
- How does advocacy fit into the idea of pursuing justice?

Concluding remarks: As we prepare to travel to Washington, D.C. for the L'Taken social justice seminar, organized by the Religious Action Center, we will become advocates. Perhaps we have been advocates before, perhaps not. Perhaps we are excited or, perhaps, like Moses and Esther, a bit skeptical about our own ability to enact change and make a difference. But, together as a community, equipped with the right knowledge and the skills, which we will get from the programming at L'Taken, and with the passion for social justice that we bring on our own, we will become convincing and effective advocates. Like Esther, Moses, and Abraham, we will fulfill our Jewish obligation to speak out against injustice and wrongdoing, with plenty of help along the way. We will be partners with God and each other in the pursuit of *tikkun olam*. *Kain yiheh ratzon*. May this be God's will.

Source Sheets can be found as PDFs on rac.org or online at:

Abraham: www.sefaria.org/sheets/43348

Moses: <http://www.sefaria.org/sheets/43352>

Esther: www.sefaria.org/sheets/43353

Appendix A
Comparison Table and Discussion Questions

Comparison	Abraham	Moses	Esther
With God or Against?			
Willing or convinced?			
In a position of power?			
Need miracles?			
Successful?			
Saves Jews or all People?			
I would want this person advocating for me			

Comparison Questions:

- Based on these texts, what are some of the qualities of a good advocate?
- Who, in your opinion, was the best advocate? Why?
- What skills did these biblical characters possess (or not possess) as advocates?

Other notes or comparisons between Abraham, Moses, and Esther

Abraham	
Moses	
Esther	

Appendix B A Statement of Principles

Excerpt: A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism, Pittsburgh, 1999

Introduction of Pittsburgh Platform text: God commands us to pursue justice. It's not a request or a suggestion; it's a command. In the Reform Jewish community, we believe that the pursuit of justice is a key piece of our Jewish identity. This is a part of who we are. On three occasions during the last century and a half, the Reform rabbinate has adopted comprehensive statements to help guide the thought and practice of our Movement. Below is an excerpt from the most recent "Statement of Principles" that affirms the central tenets of Judaism – God, Torah and Israel.

We bring Torah into the world when we strive to fulfill the highest ethical mandates in our relationships with others and with all of God's creation. Partners with God in תיקון עולם (*tikkun olam*), repairing the world, we are called to help bring nearer the messianic age. We seek dialogue and joint action with people of other faiths in the hope that together we can bring peace, freedom and justice to our world. We are obligated to pursue צדק (*tzedek*), justice and righteousness, and to narrow the gap between the affluent and the poor, to act against discrimination and oppression, to pursue peace, to welcome the stranger, to protect the earth's biodiversity and natural resources, and to redeem those in physical, economic and spiritual bondage. In so doing, we reaffirm social action and social justice as a central prophetic focus of traditional Reform Jewish belief and practice. We affirm the מצוה (*mitzvah*) of צדקה (*tzedakah*), setting aside portions of our earnings and our time to provide for those in need. These acts bring us closer to fulfilling the prophetic call to translate the words of Torah into the works of our hands.